

---

**Guide to  
Iowa  
Outdoor  
Advertising  
Sign  
Regulations**



**January 2002**

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

This guide will acquaint you with Iowa laws regulating outdoor advertising signs along the state's primary highways. It defines various types of outdoor signs and presents the general prohibitions and sign controls which apply to them.

The general prohibitions and sign controls discussed in this guide apply to signs along all primary highways, including signs located:

- In cities, if they are visible from the primary highway and located within 660 feet of the highway right of way.
- In rural areas, if they are visible from the highway, regardless of their distance from the highway right of way.

The sign controls in this guide do not apply to:

- Signs on city streets and county roads which are not visible from the primary highway system.
- Signs on interstate and freeway highways, with exception of private directional signing. (Controls for these highways are more restrictive and must be discussed on a case-by-case basis.)

In this guide you will also find information about outdoor advertising permits, and where to obtain application forms and additional information concerning these permits.



**Iowa Department  
of Transportation**

## **GENERAL PROHIBITIONS**

These general prohibition apply to all types of signs discussed in this brochure.

1. No sign may encroach on or hang over the highway right of way.
2. No sign may be lighted so it impairs the vision of any motor vehicle driver.
3. No sign may obstruct the view of any highway or railroad to the extent it makes it dangerous to use the highway.
4. No sign may imitate or resemble an official traffic control sign, signal or device.
5. No sign may obscure or physically interfere with an official traffic control sign, signal or device.

## **SIGN CONTROLS**

The following sections define the common types of signs and discuss the specific sign controls which apply to each type.

## **POLITICAL SIGNS**

Political signs are signs erected to solicit votes or support for, or in opposition to any candidate or any political party under whose designation any candidate is seeking nomination or election. Political signs may also contain messages concerning any public question on the ballot in an election held under the laws of the state.

Although Section 306C.22 of the Iowa Code regulates the size and time duration on political signs, these regulations can no longer be enforced. Distinctions will no longer be made between these types of signs and on-premise signs expressing an opinion or personal belief. The signs may be erected on private property at any time and of any size, provided that the property owner consents to the erection of the sign, and the sign conforms to the general prohibition listed above.

## Special Event Signs

Chapter 306C of the Iowa Code defines a special event sign as a “temporary advertising device, not larger than 32 square feet in area, erected for the purpose of notifying the public of noncommercial community events including but not limited to fairs, centennials, festivals, and celebrations open to the general public and sponsored or approved by a city, county or school district.”

1. Special event signs may be erected on private property, with the owner’s consent, no more than 60 days prior to the date of the special event.
2. Special event signs must be removed no later than 24 hours after the end of the event.
3. As a general rule, special event signs are prohibited within 660 feet of an interstate highway.
4. Approval by the Iowa Department of Transportation is not required to erect a special event sign that meets the General Prohibitions and the criteria listed above.

## Municipal, County and School District Recognition Signs

Signs that welcome approaching travelers to a community, county or school district or display a similar public spirited message.

In addition to the GENERAL PROHIBITIONS (page 1) municipal, county and school district recognition signs must conform to the following controls:

1. **Approval:** The Iowa Department of Transportation’s approval of the sign’s message and proposed location is required prior to erecting the sign.

A special application form must be filed with the department along with a letter of approval from the city, county or school. No fees are required.

2. **Location:** The sign must be located within the zoning or territorial jurisdiction of the political subdivision. Municipal recognition signs must be within two miles of the city’s corporate limits.

3. **Message:** The sign's message may identify the political subdivision, its boundaries, facilities, public services and attractions of a non-commercial nature. (Any advertising is prohibited.)
4. **Sponsors:** A recognition sign may identify up to two sponsors per sign, provided the message area devoted to the sponsor does not exceed eight square feet per sponsor, is limited only to the identification of the sponsor, and does not contain any advertising or product logos.
5. **Common Structure:** Municipal recognition and church or service club signs may be erected on a common structure, providing each category of signing conforms to established criteria.

## Church and Service Club Signs

Church and service club signs display a message relating to the facilities' locations, services or meetings.

In addition to the GENERAL PROHIBITION (page 1), church and service club signs must conform to the following controls:

1. **Approval:** The Iowa Department of Transportation's approval of the sign's message and proposed location is required **prior** to the sign being erected.
2. **Size:** Individual signs are limited to a maximum of 8 square feet of display area.
3. **Message:** The sign's message is restricted to the name of the church or club, its location, hours of services or meetings, and an appropriate emblem. (Any advertising is prohibited.)

## Logo Signs

Specific information service signing (logo) may be available along interstates and freeway primary highways for qualifying gas, food, lodging, camping, and tourist attractions. For information, you may refer to a separate publication, *Logo Business Signs*.

## **Off-right of Way Private Directional Signs**

Directional sign permits are required for directional signs. Off-right of way directional signs (located on private property along interstate, freeway primary and primary highways) are intended to inform motorists of public and privately owned natural phenomena, historic, cultural, scientific, educational and religious sites, and areas of natural scenic beauty or which are naturally suited for outdoor recreation that are nationally or regionally known.

### *Interstate Highways*

To qualify for a private directional sign visible from an interstate highway, an individual activity, area or attraction must have an annual visitor count of 15,000 or more.

### *Freeway primary and Primary Highways*

To qualify for a private directional sign visible from primary and freeway primary highways, an individual activity, area or attraction must:

- a. Have an annual visitor count of 10,000 or more; or
- b. Be on the federal historic register and have an annual visitor count of 5,000 or more; or
- c. Have an annual visitor count of 2,500 or more, of which at least 25% of the visitors must reside outside the county in which the activity, attraction or area is located.

In addition to the GENERAL PROHIBITIONS (page 1), off-right of way directional signs must conform to the following controls:

1. **Permit:** An approved permit must be obtained from the Iowa Department of Transportation **prior** to erecting the sign.
2. **Location:** Interstate highway private directional signs must be located within 75 air miles of the activity, area or attraction. Primary highway private directional signs must be located within 50 air miles of the activity, attraction or area.

No private directional sign may be located in any publicly owned rest area, park land or scenic area. No sign may be located within the adjacent area on either side of the highway within 2,000 feet of such facilities.

No sign may be located adjacent to the highway on either side within 2,000 feet of an interchange along any interstate or freeway primary highway (measured along the freeway from the nearest point of the beginning or ending of pavement widening at the exit from or entrance to the main traveled way.)

3. **Size:** Signs shall not exceed 150 square feet, including border and trim, nor be more than 20 feet in height or length.
4. **Number:** Not more than three directional signs pertaining to the same activity, area or attraction and facing the same direction of travel may be erected along any one interstate, freeway primary or primary highway.
5. **Spacing:** Directional signs facing the same direction of travel shall be spaced a minimum of one mile apart.
6. **Message:** Messages on signs shall be limited to the identification of the activity, area or attraction, and directional information useful to the traveler in locating it. This may include mileage, route numbers or exit numbers. The message shall also include current and sufficient information to inform the motorist of the hours, days, and months of operation.
7. **Lights:** In general, flashing, intermittent or moving lights are prohibited.
8. **Special requirements:** In addition to the requirements already listed, the following must be provided with directional signing permit applications:
  - a. Proof of required visitor count and visitor addresses, as necessary.
  - b. Information concerning when the activity, area or attraction is open to the public.
  - c. Written assurance the attraction, activity or area complies with all applicable laws concerning public accommodations without regard to race, religion, color, sex or national origin.

Qualifying activities, sites and areas may submit a private directional sign permit application to the Iowa Department of Transportation's Office of Traffic and Safety, 800 Lincoln Way, Ames, Iowa 50010. The applications are available upon request from the above office. Upon receipt and following review by the Department of Transportation, each application is evaluated by the Tourist Signing Committee and either approved or denied. Initial fees of \$100 per sign are to be submitted with the application. Renewal fees of \$15 per sign due on or before June 30 are then billed to the sign owner annually. (Consult 761 IAC 120 for specific requirements.)

**Tourist Oriented Directional Signs (TODS)**

Tourist oriented directional signs (official signs located on the right of way of nonfreeway primary highways) are intended to provide the motorist with specific information about activities or sites of significant interest to the traveling public.

**General Requirements:** An activity or site must meet the following:

1. The activity or site shall comply with all applicable laws concerning public accommodations without regard to race, religion, color, age, sex or national origin.
2. Is open to the general public during regular and reasonable hours; not by appointment, reservation or membership only.
3. Is not conducted in a building principally used as a residence unless a separate, convenient, well-marked entrance is provided.
4. Is located in a rural area or within the corporate limits of a city with a population of 1,500 or less.
5. The activity, site or any on-premise sign advertising the activity cannot be located adjacent to or be visible from the primary highway. However, an activity or site may be eligible for signing if the activity, site or its on premise sign is not readily recognizable to a motorist who is within 300 feet of the access, driveway or intersection leading to the activity or site.

6. Tourist oriented directional signs may be placed within the maximum travel distance on a higher classified highway to direct motorists onto a lower classified highway, or on a greater traveled highway to direct motorists onto a lesser traveled highway.
7. A seasonal activity or site shall be required to have closed panels or masking on the TODS when they are closed for a period of time or if their hours of operation decrease below the minimum requirements.

**Special Requirements:** In addition to the general requirements, the following must also be met to qualify for tourist oriented directional signing:

1. **Motorist Service:** An activity or site that provides a motorist service such as gas, food, lodging or passenger vehicle service or repair must:
  - a. Be open a minimum of eight hours a day, six days a week.
  - b. Be open 12 months a year or during the normal seasonal period.
  - c. Be located within five miles of the primary highway.
2. **Tourist Attraction:** An activity or site that is of significant interest to tourists as historic, cultural, scientific, or religious, or a site of natural scenic beauty, or an area naturally suited for outdoor recreation must:
  - a. Be open a minimum of 40 hours a week, five days a week.
  - b. Be open a minimum of three consecutive months each year.
  - c. Be located within five miles of the primary highway, or within 10 miles if open a minimum of eight hours a day, seven days a week.

3. **Agricultural Activity:** An activity or site of significant interest to the tourist must:
  - a. Be open an minimum of 40 hours a week, five days a week.
  - b. Be open 12 months a year or during the normal seasonal period.
  - c. Be located within 10 miles of the primary highway. (Many agricultural activities may be required to provide guided tours, have a tourist brochure and include the word “tours” on their signs.)
  
4. **Other Commercial Activities:** A commercial activity or site of significant interest to tourists must:
  - a. Be open 40 hours a week, five days a week.
  - b. Be open 12 months a year or during the normal seasonal period (minimum four consecutive weeks.)
  - c. Be located within five miles of the primary highway.

Authorized representatives of qualifying activities, sites and areas may submit a tourist oriented directional signing application to the address listed at the back of this guide.

Following review by the Iowa Department of Transportation, each application is evaluated by the Tourist Signing Committee and either approved or denied.

The cost of the two (2) official signs is \$700, which covers the administrative fees, design, fabrication and installation of the signs. An annual renewal fee, due on or before June 30 each year, is \$50 for each sign. If needed, official trailblazing signs shall be required along county roads or city streets to guide motorists to the activity once they have left the primary route. The signs are fabricated by the Department of Transportation, at a cost of \$26 each. Installation costs are established by and are paid to the appropriate city or county office. Closed panel or masking fees will be \$40 per sign per year. All fees are subject to change to cover the actual costs of maintaining the program.

TODS are considered official signs and remain the property of the Iowa Department of Transportation. (Consult 761 IAC 119 for specific requirements.)

### **On-premise Signs**

On-premise signs advertise the principal product sold or activity conducted on the property where the sign is located. They may concern the sale or lease of the property on which the sign is located. “For Sale” or “For Lease” signs displaying the legend “Sold” or “Leased” are not legal on-premise signs.

The GENERAL PROHIBITIONS (page 1) apply to on-premise signs.

**Permit:** Signs may require local city or county permit or approval. However, they do not require state permit or approval if they conform to the following criteria:

1. **Location:** Signs must be located on the same property as the advertised activity.

NOTE: Signs cannot be located on narrow strips of land that cannot be put to any reasonable use directly related to the advertised activity other than signing.

2. **Message:** Messages on signs are limited to advertising only those products sold or activities conducted at the sign site.

When a sign consists principally of brand name or trade name advertising and the product or service advertised is only incidental to the principal activity, or if it brings rental income to the property owner, it shall be considered outdoor advertising and not an on-premise sign.

### **Note:**

Outdoor advertising permits are required for off-premise signs and restricted on-premise signs along interstate highways.

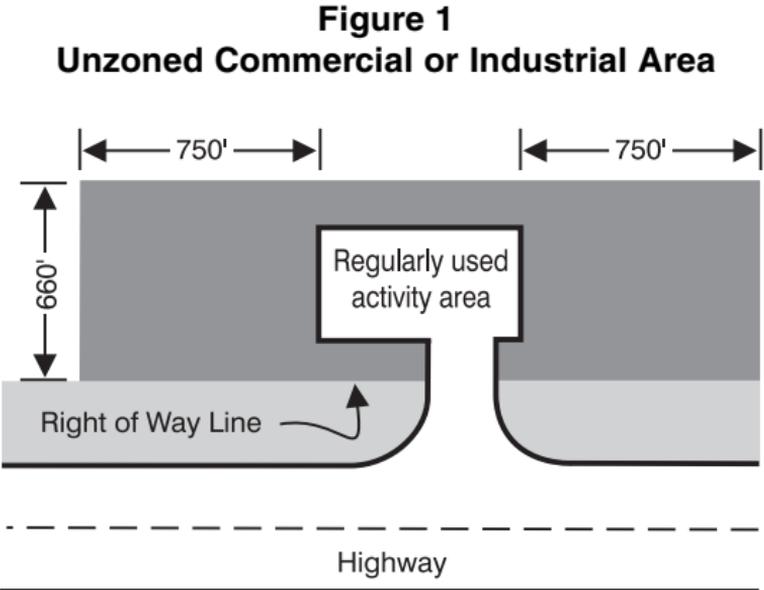
### **Off-premise Signs**

Off-premise signs display general advertising about products or services available at locations other than at the sign site.

In addition to the GENERAL PROHIBITIONS (page1), the following controls apply to off-premise signs:

- 1. Permit:** A permit must be obtained from the Iowa Department of Transportation **prior** to erecting the sign.
- 2. Zoning Restrictions:** In cities and counties where local zoning has been established, new signs may be erected only in areas zoned commercial or industrial.

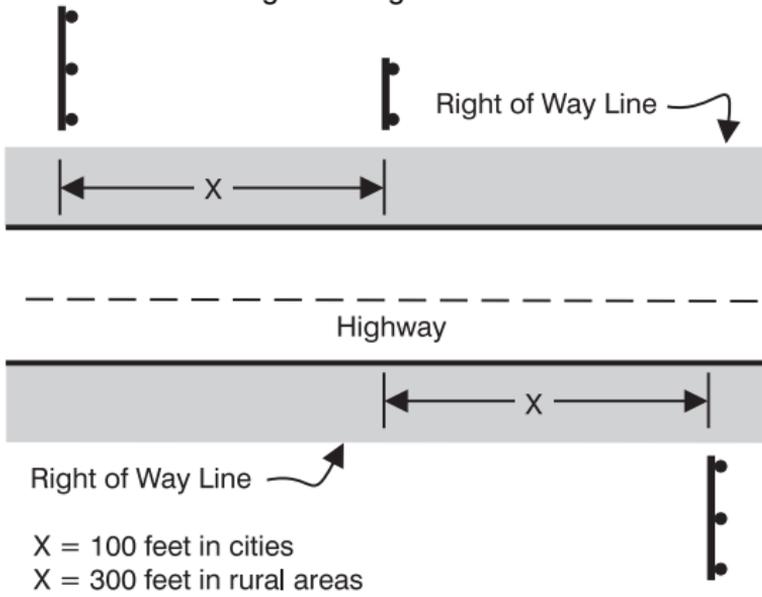
In unzoned cities and counties, new signs may be erected only in areas classified as “unzoned commercial or industrial.” These are areas occupied by one or more commercial or industrial activities and the area surrounding them on the same side of the highway within the limits shown in Figure 1.



- 3. Size:** The display area of a single face sign is limited to a maximum of 1,200 square feet.  
  
For signs facing more than one direction, the display areas are limited to a maximum of 750 square feet per direction.
- 4. Lights:** In general, flashing, intermittent or moving lights are prohibited.
- 5. Spacing:** In cities, a new sign must be a minimum of 100 feet from any other off-premise sign facing the same direction, regardless of which side of the highway the sign is located. (See Figure 2.)

## Figure 2 Sign Spacing

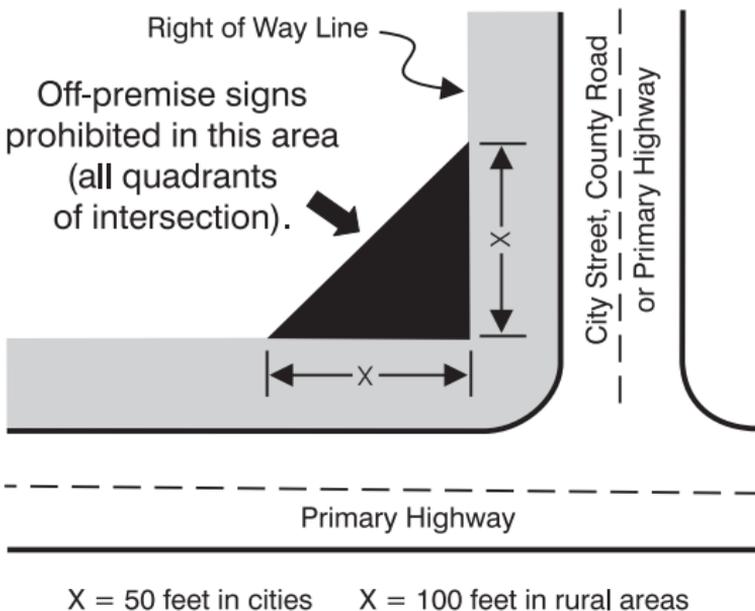
All measurements are along the center line of the highway between signs facing the same direction.



In rural areas, a new sign must be a minimum of 300 feet from any other off-premise sign facing the same direction, regardless of which side of the highway the sign is located. (See Figure 2.)

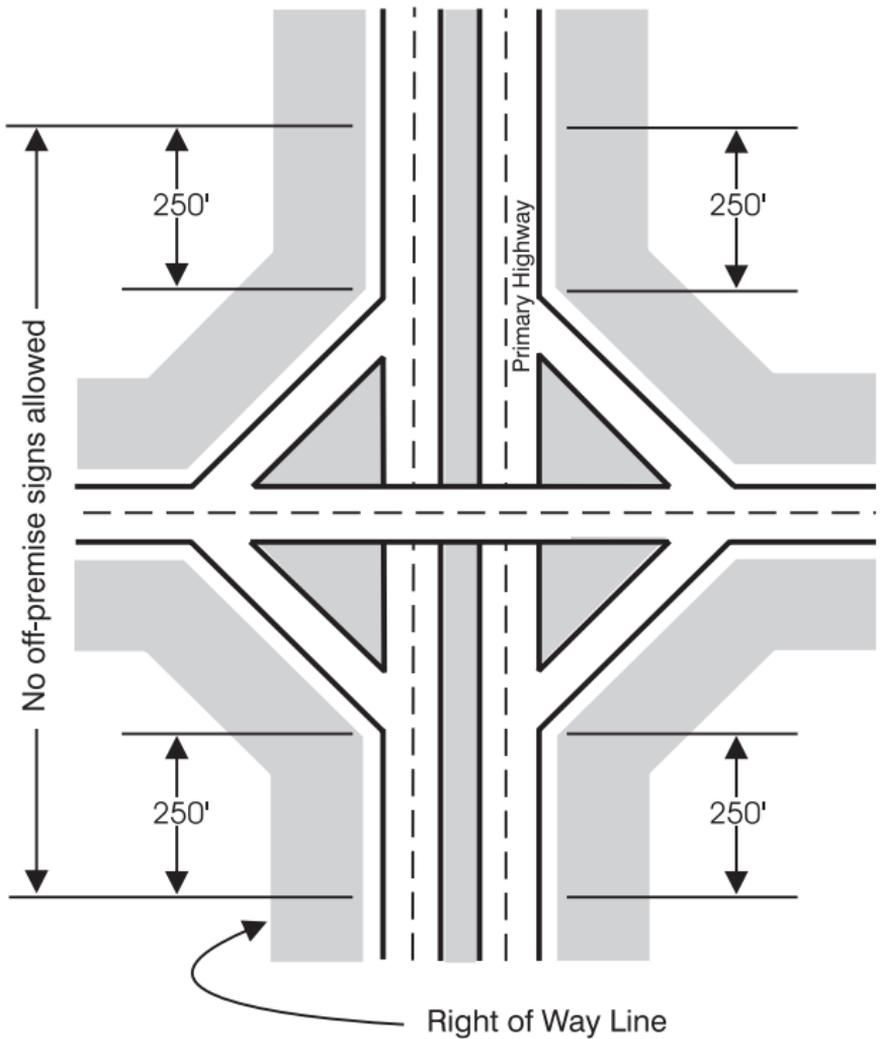
6. **Placement:** At the intersection of a primary highway and a city street, alley, county road or another primary highway, off-premise signs are prohibited in an area at the corner of private property to maintain adequate sight distance for motorist safety. (See Figure 3.)

## Figure 3 Sight Distance at Intersections (Daylight Area)



Off-premise signs cannot be located within an interchange area. The first eligible locations are 250 feet beyond the nearest widening used for acceleration or deceleration of traffic to and from the main traveled way. (See Figure 4.)

**Figure 4**  
**Off-premise Signs**  
**Within an Interchange Area**



If two interchanges are close in proximity to one another in such a way that a continuous on/off ramp does not allow traffic to join the main traveled way between them, the entire area between the interchanges is exempt from off-premise signs.

The following information will help you complete the permit application correctly.

1. A permit is required for each direction a sign is facing. However, only one permit is required for a back-to-back sign advertising the same business or service on each face, and no larger than 8 feet in width or height and 32 feet in square area.
2. Permit fees are set by statute as follows:

The initial fee (non-refundable), payable at the time of application, is \$100.

The annual renewal fee, due on or before June 30 each year, is based on size of the face and is as follows:

SIZE (sq.ft.)	FEE
1-375	\$15
376-999	\$25
Over 1,000	\$50

3. The following items must accompany each permit application:
  - a. A check for the fee or fees due, made payable to the Iowa Department of Transportation.
  - b. A copy of the sign owner's site lease with the landowner. (In the case of a verbal lease, a statement of the terms of the lease signed by the sign owner will be accepted.)
4. In cities or counties **where zoning has been established**, the respective zoning official must complete the portion of the permit application titled "Zoning Information." (Local sign regulations and zoning information may normally be obtained at city halls or county courthouses.)

In cities or counties **where zoning has not been established**, the qualifying activity must be identified in the appropriate space on the permit application. (See page 10)

5. The permit application will ask you to do the following:
  - a. Use the milepost nearest the sign as a reference point for the sign location. (In areas where mileposts are not in place, locate from a major intersection.)

Measure the distance from the nearest milepost to the sign, and record the distance as indicated on the application.

- b. Identify highways and intersecting city streets or county roads on the sign location map. Indicate the distance from the sign to the pavement. (Measure from the back of the curb or nearest edge of pavement, not from the road shoulder.)

NOTE: You will help us process your permit more quickly if you reference your sign site to identifiable landmarks.

For specific requirements consult 306C, Code of Iowa, and 716 IAC 117.

---

## **WHERE TO OBTAIN APPLICATION FORMS AND INFORMATION**

**Advertising Management  
Office of Traffic and Safety**  
Iowa Department of Transportation  
Ames, IA 50010  
**515-239-1296**

**or**  
**[www.IowaRoadSigns.com](http://www.IowaRoadSigns.com)**